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ABSTRACT

The common perception on the part of higher education institutions, academic staff, and scholarship donors, that English language skill level is the cause of the academic difficulties (problems in adjustment, longer completion times required) of international graduate students is examined, drawing on experience at the Australian National University. The university's efforts to address these students' language needs are discussed. The university's National Centre for Development Studies (NCDS) provides programs for over 250 international students in four degree programs each year. Foreign entrants may be admitted with lower English proficiency levels than in the university as a whole. Academic staff have expressed concern about the students' academic problems, but faculty development workshops to address the problem have been poorly attended. A program of discipline-specific study and academic skills courses, both pre-enrollment and concurrent with enrollment, has been developed to provide explicit instruction in critical analysis, research skills, writing, and seminars. This systematic approach to development of academic skills has been effective for students, as reflected in the experiences of individual students. Implications for entry requirements, academic skills program development, language training and testing, and research are discussed. Contains 10 references. (MSE)

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"They've got a problem with English": perceptions of the difficulties of international post-graduate students.

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Abstract: This paper explores the common perception that "language" is the cause of the academic difficulties of international students. A low level of English proficiency is often seen as the reason for their difficulties in adjustment and longer completion times. A common view is that if language entry requirements were to be raised or remedial English language support provided, the problem would be solved. Over the last eight years, the National Centre for Development Studies (NCDS) at the Australian National University has changed its approach to language and academic support for its students, both international and local. A discipline-specific genre-based approach, which takes into account the broader cultural contexts of the institution and the specific cultural context of the discipline, has replaced the "remedial English" approach. This new approach has proved beneficial for both staff and students. The paper examines the issues and problems which have arisen in its implementation. Finally, the academic and institutional implications are outlined.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the common perception on the part of institutions, academic staff and scholarship donors that an inadequate grasp of the English language is the major cause of the academic difficulties experienced by international post-graduate students in English language institutions. The paper examines the responses of the National Centre for Development Studies (NCDS) at the Australian National University (ANU) to issues of language proficiency and student performance. The first section of the paper deals with the reasons for exploring these issues. The second section reviews the language and academic skills programs at NCDS, with particular reference to the changes which have occurred and the obstacles encountered. The final section outlines the implications of the findings for academic programs and staffing, language testing and entry requirements, and for the process of educational development.

This paper draws on the experience of NCDS in providing programs for over 250 graduate students each year, mostly from Asia, Africa and the Pacific, but also with an increasing proportion of Australian first- and second-language English speakers. Four programs are offered at Graduate Diploma, Masters and PhD levels: Demography, Development Administration, Economics of Development, Environmental Management for Development. Each has its own combination of coursework and thesis requirements. The Centre, established in the 1970s and currently with core funding from the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (now known as AusAID), has the largest population of international post-graduate students at the ANU, funded mostly by scholarships from AusAID, other international organisations or home governments. Recently, there have been a few privately funded international students. Australian students are usually self-supporting. Of the international students, some have undertaken language training

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as a pre-requisite to selection; others whose English language proficiency is deemed to be satisfactory have not. In general, those not tested are those whose first language is English or whose undergraduate degree was in the English medium. Australian citizens from non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB) are sometimes tested if they have not long been in the country, but language entry criteria for this group do not exist.

This paper addresses two propositions. The first is that, for post-graduate students, there is no correlation between language test scores used for admission purposes and academic results. The second proposition is that a focused discipline-specific academic skills program is an effective solution for the problems faced by the majority of international post-graduate students because it more effectively targets the area of unclear expectations and cultural differences. The phrase "cultural differences" is used to refer to a variety of differences which may occur in many contexts: those entailed in the transfer from one country to another, one education system to another, one institution to another, one discipline to another and one academic level to another. By implication, discipline-based academic skills programs will also benefit students whose first language is English; they too experience "cultural change" in embarking on post-graduate study. The paper argues that the academic skills courses are not "support" programs; the term "support" implies that they are not central and that the main game is elsewhere. Our argument is that these programs are fundamental to the teaching and supervision which must occur in an explicit way at graduate level if both students and staff are to achieve their goals in the teaching-learning process. In the absence of these discipline-based academic skills programs, institutions have no choice but to fall back on the tangible evidence of a student's past performance (academic record and language test scores) as a way of lessening the frustrations for both students and staff.

Language entry scores and academic difficulties

Studies on the ability of English language proficiency to predict academic success are inconclusive. Graham (1987) has provided a useful summary of these studies conducted. Particularly in the case of graduate students, English language proficiency seems to be only one of a number of factors determining whether international students succeed in their studies; other factors might include country of origin, first language, areas of specialisation, and attitudes to learning. Her conclusion is that, while a minimum language test score might be applicable, the level of this score will differ. She recommends that each institution conduct its own investigation of appropriate scores and entry requirements:

One clear conclusion that the lack of consistently high correlations between English test scores and academic success leads to is that English proficiency is only one among many factors that affect academic success...It seems likely that there is a minimal level of English proficiency required before other factors assume more importance. What that mini-

mal level is will almost certainly vary from institution to institution and, indeed, from program to program (Graham, 1987:515,517).

One of Graham's suggested solutions to the question of language proficiency levels is that proficiency requirements could be adapted in accordance with the services available to students once they begin their study.

Students seeking admission to NCDS have a lower TOEFL and IELTS test score requirement than for the Australian National University as a whole, on the grounds that academic skills staff are employed in each of the programs. The NCDS requirements are 500 TOEFL, with a TWE of 4.5, or overall 6.00 IELTS, with a minimum of 6 in writing, a minimum of 5 in only one of listening, speaking or reading, and a minimum of 5.5 in the remaining components. Even though these lower levels apply, there are still cases which need to be argued on an individual basis in order to admit students who do not meet these requirements. Sometimes language test scores are not available, time or funding constraints exist, or test scores may not match what is otherwise known of an applicant's likelihood of success. In general this process of arguing each case is time-consuming and difficult; however, experience shows that this is a desirable mechanism, and most of the students accepted by this process have proved capable of succeeding. In our experience, the importance of factors other than language proficiency is very much under-rated, and it cannot be assumed that any student entering NCDS has all the academic, research and language skills required in order to complete sustained independent research.

Once students are admitted to their programs of study, the general perception in higher education institutions seems to be that their success is up to them. If they have been accepted, it is expected that they should have the skills and ability to succeed. Most students at NCDS are already professionals in their own countries, working in research or teaching institutions or the bureaucracy. They are highly motivated, often by the need to succeed in order to maintain their professional positions at home or to obtain promotions. For many, the time spent away in Australia is somewhat risky - they may be replaced by others in situations of intense competition for high-status jobs, they may have left their partners and children in uncertain circumstances, and they may not feel confident that the risk is worthwhile. If they do bring their families to Australia, there is the necessary adjustment period, often with under-occupied partners thrown into roles they are not accustomed to - caring for children, cooking, being dependent - having left their jobs and support networks. For many this is an adventure and a challenge; for others it is a difficult process. Against this background, the professional who has now become a student also needs to adapt to the new academic culture where the rules are often unclear. For most, even those whose first language is English, difficulties emerge in making the transition from one academic culture to another, from undergraduate to post-graduate, from being a researcher or teacher to being a

student, from being someone who knows and makes the rules to being someone who has to find out what they are. The process of learning by trial and error is time consuming, costly and unprofessional.

There are two sides to the teaching-learning equation. It is often easier to focus on the students as those who are seen to benefit from this educational opportunity and to assume that, if the teaching-learning process does not proceed smoothly, there must be some problem with the students. Students' academic difficulties manifest in many ways. They may obtain erratic grades in coursework assessment, have difficulty in meeting deadlines, miss appointments and classes, develop writer's block, lack 'initiative', withdraw from interaction, suffer minor health problems or stress symptoms, and be unable to complete their thesis within the allotted time. Supervisors often complain that students do not appear to understand and implement what has been discussed with them, and express disappointment that they are not living up to expectations in terms of academic performance. A common course of action is to refer the student to a study skills adviser or in some cases to a personal counsellor or social worker. In the case of international students the problem may be identified as a problem with English and short-term remedial tutoring arranged. When funding allows, students may be required to interrupt their study in order to undertake an extra period of intensive English at another institution. These solutions involve extra costs to the individuals, to the institutions and to the funding agencies.

The other side of the teaching-learning equation, however, is the teaching and supervision side. Graduate students experience difficulties in adapting to the new expectations; academic staff likewise experience difficulties in teaching and supervising graduate students who have different backgrounds and needs. With increasing numbers of graduate students at the ANU and elsewhere taking coursework, academic difficulties are often identified earlier than is the case for students who are at the stage of working up thesis proposals, consulting with supervisors, reading, and not writing or presenting themselves in a more public forum. Nevertheless, it is generally left up to students to learn from their mistakes for each assessment task, which may be totally different from the previous one. Research-only students can have difficulties which go unnoticed for many months, surfacing only when they present their first seminar after six months or so, or when the first chapters of the thesis are read by the supervisory panel. In some cases, it is only when the draft of the whole thesis is subjected to scrutiny that the full extent of the problems become obvious. Valuable time is often lost and suddenly the student becomes the focus of attention. Most staff have had some experience of this kind of drama. Many will openly admit that they have felt obliged to help students out by contributing more to a thesis than they would like, but feel that there is no choice. It is hard to fail a students after two years or within months of expected completion. This would seem to imply that at some level academic staff feel that it is not the fault of the student, but that they feel frustrated and powerless in

solving the problems students are facing. Part of the problem may lie in with the training that academics themselves receive. In general in Australia the PhD, a research qualification, is considered a sufficient qualification for teaching in a university. The introduction of coursework means that academics are now involved in determining assessment, often with very little experience of establishing assessment criteria. This can become a very frustrating and time-consuming process of trial and error for both staff and students.

At the ANU many academic staff have expressed concern about the international students in their classes or under their supervision. Seminars and workshops have been organised to provide support for academic staff who work with international students. In our experience these have not been well attended. Academic staff, too, are under pressure and many find the extra demands onerous. In calculating academic workloads no allowance is made for the extra time and effort required for students who do not share their cultural background. The support provided by the centrally located ANU Study Skills Centre is invaluable both for students and staff; however, as both students and staff see the benefits of working with the Graduate School adviser, resources are becoming more stretched. For such centres, the brief is extremely broad with disparate needs to be met without the benefit of the continuity of a discipline focus. The work done with students is not English language support, although language is always the means of expression. As a response to the complaints of staff about overseas students' writing skills, the TESOL Centre at the University of Canberra carried out a survey of what academic staff thought to be most important in work submitted by international students and found that the level of tolerance of error seemed to have risen, and that staff valued "ability to communicate knowledge more than the other traditional academic conventions..."(Canberra Times, 1994). This kind of survey gives additional support to the view that a focus on language alone is too narrow.

These difficulties between international students and their lecturers and supervisors have repercussions at an institutional level. Faced with the need to maintain the reputation of the institution, the gatekeepers direct their concern toward their main area of responsibility: entry requirements. Apart from the required academic qualifications, the main tangible entry requirement is an indication of language proficiency, usually a language test score. The first reaction has been to increase the language requirement: to add a compulsory Test of Written English score in the case of TOEFL, to require a GRE test, or to define minimum sub-score requirements in the case of IELTS. In our experience, these language entry requirements are strictly applied, even in the face of recommendations by the test originators that they not be strictly used to determine whether students will succeed academically, and it is difficult to obtain entry for students who fall below the cut-off points, even when evidence of academic ability (and sometimes other second language ability) exists. The trend overall seems to be to place more em-

phasis on language proficiency rather than to take into account the other factors which have been shown to be important.

A related but complicating issue in the ANU experience is that language tests are not uniformly required for all students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Students from African countries, India and the Pacific Islands are not generally required to provide a language test score, on the grounds that English was the medium of instruction for their first degree. This being the case, Bangladeshi students also ought to be granted exemption. Although their IELTS scores are often below the level required for entry, this reflects not so much a poor level of language proficiency, but poor testing infrastructure and conditions. If these tests are perceived as useful in predicting academic success, then they ought to be applied uniformly. Their use has been perceived as discriminatory by some students who observe that many of these students who are deemed by institutional gatekeepers to have adequate English language skills experience as many difficulties as those who are tested in performing their academic tasks. Students from Papua New Guinea, for example, often have difficulties with register, using colloquial language inappropriate for an academic context; those from African countries, on the other hand, often use language in a very formal and legalistic way, just as inappropriate for modern academic communication. All groups are likely to have difficulties in ascertaining the expectations of the discipline as far as written and spoken genres specific to that discipline are concerned.

Language and academic skills programs at NCDS

Each of the programs at NCDS employs academic skills staff at associate lecturer level. These staff are responsible for organising and implementing programs specific to the disciplines in which they teach. When academic skills positions were first advertised (as remedial language support positions) in the late 1980s, most concern seemed to be about "English". It seemed that academic staff focused their frustration on language; if both grammatical and generic problems were present in students' work, it was easier to focus on language than on identifying the specific generic characteristics that were absent or inappropriate. This may be because academic staff themselves learned to use genres by "osmosis" rather than by being made explicitly aware of their characteristics through a process of modelling.

Academic skills programs are not English language programs although they necessarily involve discussions of language issues. Their theoretical basis is an extension of the work of educational linguists who believe that genre provides a better starting point than grammar for relating education and language (for an overview, see Hammond, 1987; for more detail on the theory of academic skills programs, see May et al., forthcoming). Teaching about genres means teaching explicitly the features of the academic spoken and written genres that students are required to use. Often this means clarifying with lecturers and supervisors exactly

what they do expect. In many cases, without this kind of clarification, lecturers cannot convey their expectations except in relation to what students produce in response to assessment tasks.

Academic skills courses begin with preparatory courses before students enrol. These focus on general preparation for graduate study: library and research skills, computing, conventions for writing, seminar presentation skills, cross-cultural communication and a range of personal adjustment areas. Our observation over several years has been that the students who have most difficulty in meeting post-graduate academic expectations of genre, argument and logic, research and documentation of the research process, have been those international and Australian students who have missed the preparatory courses.

Once students have begun formal courses, weekly classes academic skills are held in each program for explicit teaching about critical analysis, research skills, writing and seminars. In addition, individual and small-group consultations are scheduled. Academic skills staff, together with lecturers and supervisors, give feedback on written work and seminars given as part of assessment at all stages. Workshops are held for PhD students, and PhD thesis chapters are submitted early to academic skills staff for comment to avoid the need for last-minute editing and the temptation to write the thesis for a student. The feedback given covers the range of genres and their characteristics, and the appropriate language for communicating in the discipline. In many cases this involves prior analysis of these genres and identifying what lecturers expect from students. Some units are now given names reflecting the genres with which they are concerned, allowing an explicit focus on generic characteristics: Research Seminar, Research Project, and Case Study are some examples in Masters courses.

One significant result of this process has been a systematic approach to the development of skills across the various units taken. Assessment tasks have been co-ordinated to progress from less complex to more complex tasks; for example, seminar presentation begins with short presentations in Graduate Diploma units, leading up to 70-minute seminars by the end of Masters courses and 90-minute PhD seminars; a similar structure exists for reviews of articles, books and the literature on a broad topic. Because academic skills staff have both language teaching qualifications and qualifications in the discipline in which they work, or in a closely related field, and because they are not usually involved in formal assessment of students, they are in a position to be intermediaries in the process of systematising and clarifying expectations. They are mediators, teachers, facilitators, counsellors and advocates, often perceiving needs and filling gaps, with a rare overview of all students and their courses.

Academic skills: the student experience

It has not been possible to correlate language entry scores with academic success on any statistical basis because of lack of appropriate records. However, it is useful to look more closely at the experience of individuals in order to see how language proficiency might have affected their academic performance and to illustrate the need for flexibility in applying limits. Three types of experience are important: first, those admitted with language scores which were not considered satisfactory; second, those who did not succeed in their study and either did not proceed from Graduate Diploma to Masters or went home before completing Graduate Diploma; and third, those who were in danger of failing but did not. The risk of failure seems to arise in three particular situations. First, students who have transferred from another discipline which has different requirements in relation to genre and quantitative skills, and who have not attended the preparatory course, often experience serious problems. Students who have previously studied in English-medium institutions often assume that they have no need for academic skills classes. Second, international students who miss the discipline-specific preparatory course are often not prepared to operate in the academic culture and are left out of the new student support networks. Third, some Australian students assume they do not have the same problems as international students; often they do not attend the preparatory course and academic skills classes and can often not understand why the standard of their work is unacceptable.

In the Demography Program, the majority of those who have not been allowed to progress from Graduate Diploma to Masters have been from the Pacific Island nations, and therefore have not been required to submit a language proficiency test score in order to be admitted. Indeed, having a language test score would not have helped in any case. Their difficulties resulted from a lack of analytical and critical skills, and a poor quantitative background, and even with extra classes in quantitative subjects and help in acquisition of academic and research skills, the task of making up ground was too great.

In 1989, Graduate Diploma students in Demography were required to write a critical review essay. Of the 20 students in that intake, three were Australians. At that stage academic skills classes were not a requirement for all students, and only those who felt they needed help would attend, mostly international students. In this case the academic skills class examined what was meant by a critical review essay, focussing on each of the terms "critical", "review" and "essay", using a model provided by the lecturer. When the essay was graded the three Australian students received the three lowest marks and began attending classes thereafter!

R., from a Pacific Island nation, had completed a Masters degree from an American University and enrolled in a Masters in Development Administration. He assumed that the learning culture in Australia would be the same. However, he was unable to develop a conceptual framework for his research, which was descriptive

rather than analytical, and was unable to carry out independent library research. R. certainly had problems with grammar, but these were completely overshadowed by his inability to adjust to the demands and expectations of his course. Eventually he withdrew without completing the Masters requirements, but was accepted for PhD at another university.

T., from Indonesia, was admitted to Graduate Diploma in Demography with a TOEFL score of 487, before strict limits were applied, because she worked in a population-related area and was familiar with population issues. She had a great deal of trouble with writing but a good grasp of concepts. Now, having written a good Masters thesis, T. is mid-way through a PhD. Her use of English has improved consistently, and although she still has difficulties at times with discipline-specific terminology, her written and spoken English are not an obstacle to progress. The skills she has acquired will be of great benefit to her organisation when she returns home.

K. from Lao PDR National Statistics Office, came to Australia for one year's pre-course English with an IELTS score of 4.5. At the end of the year, her score still had not reached the required 6.0. She attended the preparatory course for Demography and then took another semester of ELICOS. She was admitted to the Demography Program with a bare 6.0, but there were doubts about her ability to cope. Her overall first-semester mark was 72, and she was coping well. With training in the discipline to consolidate her statistics experience in Laos, her skills will be much in demand. Lao PDR, with very few trained demographers, is currently conducting its first population census. Training in demography, therefore, is much more of a priority for a student such as T. than spending more time becoming proficient in English.

S., from a research institute in Indonesia, was admitted with an IELTS below 6.0 because his institute regarded him as very promising and his need for training was urgent. S. struggled in Australia and did not achieve well. His writing difficulties did not improve with remedial language tutoring. Eventually, two discoveries were made which transformed his last few months. First, his eyes were re-tested and his spectacles changed. At last he could see! Second, he revealed during a consultation that he believed that in Australia a student was expected to be independent, and should not consult lecturers or work together with other students. He had been struggling without seeking assistance and without the benefit of the support which most students gain from their peers. Since his return to Indonesia, S. has made a valuable contribution to the research of his institute.

Three Vietnamese students were admitted as special cases to the Environmental Management for Development Program with IELTS 5.0. They had difficulties with language study and testing in Vietnam and took the wrong IELTS module for their course of study. They were given six months' English bridging at NCDS.

At the request of the students, who were bored doing only bridging, they were allowed to enrol in the Graduate Diploma units as non-degree students. The students completed all assessment and obtained at least distinctions in all three units. NCDS argued that they be awarded the Graduate Diploma retrospectively; this was agreed on a "never again" basis. All three completed their Masters degrees with distinctions and high distinctions. These three all had Russian as a second language and their English language proficiency was only a matter of time.

Implications

If language proficiency test scores cannot predict an international graduate student's academic success, and if discipline-based academic skills programs are an effective way of making clear to all students the expectations of the discipline in a particular academic community, what are the implications?

For institutions, there is a need to examine both areas: flexibility in entry to graduate courses and funding for discipline-based academic skills courses within graduate programs. The financial gain to universities from the fees of international students must be reciprocated with appropriate teaching (AVCC, 1988). The damage to institutions from word-of-mouth reports of bad teaching and supervision, and the extreme cases of universities being sued for poor academic preparation can be avoided. The increasing numbers of academic skills courses at Australian universities are cause for optimism in this regard (Chanock, 1995).

One way of encouraging flexibility in entry requirements for graduate courses is to build up a more extensive profile of graduate applicants, with academic background and relevant professional experience as important elements, keeping in mind that graduate students may be entering a new discipline or interdisciplinary area. A language proficiency test score would be one of a number of other elements, with a minimum required level set by professionals, both academic and administrative, within the institution, but open to negotiation where appropriate. Such a profile could include research proposals, tests of quantitative skills, reports of interviews, references from professionals, and discipline-specific tests of writing, comprehension and ability to construct an argument. The important point is that a language proficiency test score should not automatically take precedence in ruling out admission where other evidence shows the applicant to be capable. At post-graduate level students are often known to the destination institution, if not personally then by institutional association, and such a hard-line approach may not be warranted. Without academic skills courses, however, this flexibility would be likely to have negative consequences. As with current procedures, mistakes in judgement will probably still be made, but refusing the chance to study on the basis of rigid interpretation of tests which cannot predict results is discriminatory.

The introduction of discipline-based academic skills programs has far-reaching educational implications. It avoids the "deficit" view of a remedial approach to

the differences in background of graduate students, allowing a clear focus on communication within a discipline and on the genres of that discipline. It allows closer links to develop between graduate students and their supervisors and lecturers, which leads to earlier identification of difficulties and less need for course extensions, and minimises communication problems and the mismatch of expectations. By providing this clear focus on the language of the discipline, students can benefit throughout their course of study from preparatory and bridging courses until they submit their final research results. Such programs provide a basis for students to gain the professional skills they need, with a solid foundation for research and the communication of their ideas. An important aspect which should not be overlooked is that the provision of academic skills courses removes the artificial distinction often made between local and international students, and encourages co-operation and an acknowledgment of the common challenges that both groups face.

What does this mean for language training and testing? Language proficiency still remains an important consideration in admitting students to graduate programs if graduate study is to be a positive experience for all concerned. However, efforts need to be made to ensure that test scores are a genuine reflection of students' proficiency. Improving the testing infrastructure in countries of origin remains a priority: providing practice materials, information on the nature of the test and notifying students of their test dates well in advance so that tests can reflect their proficiency more accurately. The variability of testing conditions in particular countries needs to be taken into account by those responsible for selection. If language skills *per se* are not enough to guarantee student success, more effort needs to be made to provide students with the other skills they require both before they leave their own countries and before they begin to be assessed in their courses. This means that at least part of the preparatory training is often better carried out in the context in which the study will occur, in order to be able to focus on the specific "cultural" differences which could become a problem.

These propositions also have implications for research. Each institution needs to further investigate the success of existing discipline-based academic skills programs to ascertain how much they can contribute to improving student performance, and to enable each graduate program to determine its own entry requirements. Within programs there needs to be an investigation of the appropriate content and form for academic skills for the discipline. As with the NCDS experience, although there are common elements, the programs vary widely. Where records exist, an examination of the correlation between language proficiency tests and academic results of both local and international students will provide the confidence to proceed in placing the appropriate emphasis on language proficiency. In particular, an examination of where the process fails is enlightening. Why do particular students fail? Why are particular groups of students having

particular difficulties? At which stage do problems occur? What is the most appropriate way to equip students and academic staff for graduate courses?

The broad context for this discussion is the development assistance process. If development assistance in education is to be effective, it has to be seen to be making a difference, and to be positive rather than negative. Building international links between individuals and institutions is part of this process. If we do not make explicit the principles underlying the academic research cultures in our institutions, and merely provide "bandaid" support for international graduate students, these students will have experiences which will undermine their personal and professional skills rather than enhance them. If we do not pay serious attention to ensuring that students have a chance of completing their courses within the allowed time, we may be wasting development assistance resources and creating more difficulties for individuals. If we make language proficiency the main screening mechanism for admitting international students to graduate courses, we are in effect saying that it is more important for students to be proficient in English than for professionals from developing countries to have the access for further training which will benefit their home countries.

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